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ABSTRACT

It is possible to think of women's language in terms of the model implied by the following statement. Insofar as native speakers of English are concerned, the language of women in America has four sets of components: those shared with the language of men in America; those shared, in varying proportions, with other women living in patriarchies; those shared with other political minorities; and those which appear to be peculiar to American women. Such a model has two weaknesses: it is incomplete in that it omits consideration of language used by all people when talking about women; further it is uncritically derivative in that it implies that women's language is deviant. The present challenge is to seek a model for the study of women's language which is complete, that is, takes account of both the language used by women and the language used about women, and which is not uncritically derivative. (Author)

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WOMEN'S LANGUAGE MODEL: A PROPOSAL[1]

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ABSTRACT

It is possible to think of women's language in terms of the model implied by the following statement. Insofar as native speakers of English are concerned, the language of women in America has four sets of components: those shared with the language of men in America; those shared, in varying proportions, with other women living in patriarchies; those shared with other political minorities; and those which appear to be peculiar to American women. Such a model has two weaknesses; it is incomplete in that it omits consideration of language used by all people when talking about women; further it is uncritically derivative in that it implies that women's language is deviant. The present challenge is to seek a model for the study of women's language which is complete--i.e., takes account of both the language used by women and the language used about women--and which is not uncritically derivative.

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Like some other researchers, particularly Johanna DeStefano (1974), I have been concerned by the lack of a cogent framework for either researching women's American English or for reviewing the results of research. Until very recently I had been thinking of women's language in terms of a model which had its origins in a paper by Johnnetta B. Cole, a professor of Anthropology and Director of Black Studies at Washington State

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[1]An abbreviated version of this paper was presented at the 14th Southeastern Conference on Linguistics, Atlanta, Georgia, November 7, 1975.

University. The history of the model is this: in a basic and exploratory statement on black subculture, Cole suggested that the

> subculture of black America has three sets of components: those drawn from mainstream America, those which are shared, in varying proportions, with all oppressed peoples, and those which might appear to be peculiar to blacks. We might note a few examples of each. Black Americans share, with mainstream America, many traits of material culture, cars (house types, clothing); values (emphasis on technology and materialism) and behavior patterns (watching TV and voting in terms of interest groups).
>
> Black Americans also share a number of cultural traits with all individuals who are oppressed--Catholics in Northern Ireland, Native Americans, Jews, Chinese Americans. One of these traits is what I call the "minority sense." When a Jew enters a room of gentiles, a Chicano a room of Anglos, a black a room of whites, there is a common reaction, namely, the minority member will attempt to sense out where there is severe hostility and bigotry. Minority subculture teaches that one must detect or at least attempt to detect hostile attitudes and behavior in the interest of self protection--from protection of one's pride and self-esteem to protection of one's life. All oppressed peoples also share degrees of what I call the "denial urge." This is the condemnation of one's status and by extension of one's <u>self</u>. It leads 200,000 Asian women each year to undergo operations to reduce the slant of their eyes. It leads Jews to have their noses bobbed, and blacks to suffer through

bleaching creams and hair straiteners.

> The last set of components of black American subculture, and the ones to which we turn special attention in this paper, are those which we can identify as the essence of blackness. Throughout the literature in anthropology, we do not identify bits of culture which are absolutely confined to a single people. It is in the combination of traits that we see the distinctiveness of a given people; it is in the subtleties associated with universal attributes, the emphasis on certain themes by which we define a people. Using these same requirements with respect to black America, it is suggested here that the consistent and important themes in black American life are soul and style. (1970:41)

The model was elaborated and made germane to linguistic considerations by Geneva Smitherman (1972) who suggested that the language used by Blacks in America has four sets of components: those drawn from mainstream America, those which are shared, in varying proportions, with all oppressed peoples (both African and non-African), those shared with speakers of certain African languages, and those which are peculiar to Black Americans. From my knowledge of Smitherman's work, I devised the notion of looking at women's language--by which until very recently I meant primarily the language used by women--in terms of the following description: Insofar as native speakers of English are concerned, the language of women in America has four sets of components: those shared with the language of men in America; those shared, in varying proportions, with other women living in patriarchies, those shared with other political minorities; and those which appear to be peculiar to American women.

Each individual set of components would contain, as I saw it, two kinds of components, linguistic and stylistic. Again I am indebted to Smitherman's work, because it was her book Black Language and Culture: Sounds of Soul (1975) which suggested to me the virtues of dividing the components thus. The linguistic components would be features of pronunciation, grammatical usage, lexicon, etc.; research has been done by Conklin (1973), DeStefano (1975), Ide (1975), Key (1970, 1975), Lakoff (1973), and Stanley (1972). The stylistic features of women's language will be fully described only after we have explored more fully such hypothesized differences between men's and women's language as the following:

> (1) males talk more than females in conversational situations; (2) males tend to control the conversations by signaling beginnings and ends of conversations; (3) males make more judgmental, analytical statements; (4) males and females signal their perceived roles by their use of standard and non-standard verbal forms; and (5) females make more rewarding and encouraging remarks or show agreement or indecision. (Eubanks 1975:1)

Research suggests the validity of these hypotheses. In two independent projects, researchers taped university students conversing in pairs. Neither study involved enough subjects to substantiate the conclusions reached for larger groups, but the similarity of the conclusions of the two projects suggests the need for further in-depth studies.

Hirschman's tentative conclusions were that

> Differences between the sexes may be found in frequency of use of fillers; frequency of affirmative responses made to the

other speaker; frequency in the mention of oneself and/or one's conversational partner; possibly in frequency of attempted and successful interruptions. . . . The use of different kinds of qualifiers reflects a difference in style, which may be related to a difference in assertiveness. The discrepancy in frequency of affirmative responses and proportion of fillers used by the most voluminous female speaker, compared to the much lower figures for the most voluminous male speaker is interesting. It can be hypothesized that voluminous female speakers compensate for their possible aggressiveness to the other speaker in a way that aggressive male speakers do not.

The data on the flow of conversation also points to some interesting hypotheses, related to the role of the female as facilitator of the conversation: the female asks the male questions, the male answers. This question-answer pattern is not found in either of the single-sex conversations. Also the males tend to dispute the other person's utterance or ignore it, while the females acknowledge it, or often build on it. (Hirschman 1973:6)

Eubanks, whose specific hypotheses were given above, concluded thus:

Four out of the five hypotheses of this paper were proven to be correct: Males talked more in these conversations; males more often signalled beginnings and ends to conversations; males gave more elaborated, judgmental statements; and females showed their agreement and encouragement by cooing in the background, simply

> agreeing with everything said, or by apologizing for their own view or for the differences between the two. Females displayed their indecision by asking questions which sought support or by using question intonation for declarative sentences, often implying a tag question. (1975:12)

The model is thus useful; it would allow us to chart many kinds of information, that which results from research into phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical differences, as well as that which results from research into male-female conversational interaction.

But it is also seriously flawed; it is incomplete in that it allows almost no provision for the study of language used by virtually all people when talking <u>about</u> women; further, it is uncritically derivative in that it implies that women's language is deviant. An adequate model would not mirror so completely the traditional male attitudes toward women's language, attitudes that reflect general male attitudes toward all things female, which was once defined in its nominal form by H. W. Fowler like this: "a female is, shortly put, a she, or put more at length, a woman-or-girl-or-cow-or-hen-or-the-like." (1944:174) Typical statements about women's language include the notion that men's language is the norm, while women's language is deviant. The very organization of a book like Jespersen's <u>Language: Its Nature, Development, and Origin</u> illuminates his perspective on women's language. The four books into which the volume is divided are entitled respectively "History of Linguistic Science," "The Child," "The Individual and the World," and "Development of Language." Chapter XIII, "The Woman," is included in Book III, where she is categorized with "The Foreigner" (Chapter 11), "Pidgins and Congeners" (Chapter 12), and two chapters on "Causes of Change."

Evidence that that attitude is still very much with us is found even in the work of contemporary female linguists. Mary Ritchie Key's recent book, Male/Female Language, opens with a Preface the first line of which reads:

> Not another book on women! (Key 1975:v)

All this suggests that women's language cannot be studied outside a framework that involves a study of attitudes to language. It has become increasingly clear in recent years that the "chatter" for which women are denounced is a type of language use which is carefully taught us from a very early age. Even Jespersen takes note of early sex differences, though he appears to think them innate:

> Everything that is conventional in language, everything in which the only thing of importance is to be in agreement with those around you, is the girls' strong point. Boys may often show a certain reluctance to do exactly as others do: the peculiarities of their 'little language' are retained by them longer than by girls, and they will sometimes steadily refuse to correct their own abnormalities, which is very seldom the case with girls. Gaucherie and originality thus are two points between which the speech of boys is constantly oscillating. (1922:146)

It is patently absurd to think of such differences as innate. In reality, we are taught to use women's language, severely penalized if we do not use it, then we are castigated for putting to use the lessons we have learned so well. As Lakoff puts it,

> If a little girl 'talks rough' like a boy, she will

> normally be ostracized, scolded, or made fun of. In this way society, in the form of a child's parents and friends, keeps her in line, in her place. . . . If the little girl learns her lesson well, she is not rewarded with unquestioned acceptance on the part of society; rather, the acquisition of this special style of speech will later be an excuse others use to keep her in a demeaning position, to refuse to take her seriously as a human being. Because of the way she speaks, the little girl--now grown to womanhood--will be accused of being unable to speak precisely or to express herself forcefully.
>
> So a girl is damned if she does, damned if she doesn't. If she refuses to talk like a lady, she is ridiculed and subjected to criticism as unfeminine; if she does learn, she is ridiculed as unable to think clearly, unable to take part in a serious discussion: in some senses, as less than fully human. These two choices which a woman has--to be less than a woman or less than a person--are highly painful. (1973:48)

Stanley (1975) has pointed out to us some of the ways in which our language enables us to express our attitudes quite openly. She has, for instance, pointed out that it is extremely unlikely that the English language has any true generics. Women occupy a few specialized roles, e.g., nurse, prostitute, secretary, housewife, or we occupy negative semantic space, space which must be marked by the addition of a special "female marker," e.g., woman, female, lady preceding doctor, surgeon, lawyer, or -ess following waiter, author, poet.

It appears then that an adequate model for the study of women's language must be constructed with these guidelines in mind:

a. the model must allow provision for the study of language used by virtually all people when talking about women, as well as the language used by women;

b. the model must presume that the language used by women is at least potentially autonomous; and

c. the model must take full account of the important role played by attitudes toward women's language.

Acceptance of guidelines such as these will mean that researchers seriously interested in women's language will study the language used by women in same-sex situations as well as in female-male interview situations and that we will question the total adequacy of research such as that of William Labov who has, in his urban dialect work largely ignored the language of females. We will also recall that even Labov himself, who has said he has no interest in interviewing female teenagers, has advised us that some women's language may be useful for research. A characteristic statement contains both the reasons for his reluctance and the partial corrective to it:

> In middle-class groups, women generally show much less familiarity with and much less tolerance for nonstandard grammar and taboo. Whereas most men can serve as excellent informants, passive or active, for nonstandard usage (double negatives, etc.), many women cannot do so. In cases where speakers show a stylistic shift from one value of a variable to another, women show much more extreme shifts than men. (Labov, 1966, Ch. 8). [N. For example, we find that in New York City women are much more extreme than men in shifting from r-less

> speech in casual style to r-pronunciation in reading style. In the same way, women correct the high vowel in bad [bɪ:d] to [bæ:d] in a much more extreme fashion than men. This hypercorrect behavior is especially characteristic of lower-middle-class women.] Many middle-class women are critical of their husbands' speech and find it difficult to recognize the functional need for less cultivated speech patterns in daily business. This difference in the sexes does not seem to exist in rural or lower-class urban groups. Here, women can serve as well as men as informants for the nonstandard dialect and may have even less knowledge of the prestige forms if they lead an isolated life at home. (Labov 1971:207-208)

Finally, for all the usefulness of Labov's exploratory sociolinguistic research, it may be that the study of nonstandard forms is not the most interesting thing we have to learn about women and language. I contend that we do not yet know what will be the most interesting things we have to learn and, further, that the only way we will find them out is to seek a women's language model following the guidelines I have suggested today.

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